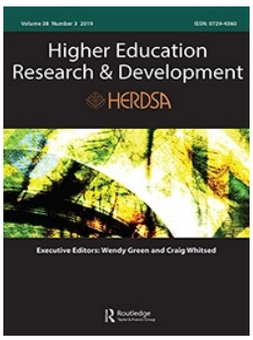

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Students' views about the purpose of higher education: a comparative analysis of six European countries

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ABSTRACT

Across Europe, assumptions are often made within the academic literature and by some social commentators that students have come to understand the purpose of higher education (HE) in increasingly instrumental terms. This is often linked to processes of marketisation and neo-liberalisation across the Global North, in which the value of HE has come to be associated with economic reward and labour market participation and measured through a relatively narrow range of metrics. It is also associated with the establishment, in 2010, of the European Higher Education Area, which is argued to have brought about the refiguration of European universities around an Anglo-American model. Scholars have contended that students have become consumer-like in their behaviour and preoccupied by labour market outcomes rather than processes of learning and knowledge generation. Often, however, such claims are made on the basis of limited empirical evidence, or a focus on policies and structures rather than the perspectives of students themselves. In contrast, this paper draws on a series of 54 focus groups with 295 students conducted in six European countries (Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain). It shows how understandings of the purpose of HE are more nuanced than much of the extant literature suggests and vary, at least to some extent, by both nation-state and higher education institution. Alongside viewing the purpose of HE as preparing them for the labour market, students emphasised the importance of tertiary-level study for personal growth and enrichment, and societal development and progress. These findings have implications for policy and practice. In particular, the broader purposes of HE, as articulated by the students in this study, should be given greater recognition by policymakers, those teaching in HE, and the wider public instead of, as is often the case, positioning students as consumers, interested in only economic gain.

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Introduction

Neoliberal policies typically understand universities as key drivers for developing infrastructures for the knowledge economy. Indeed, higher education (HE) is often deemed

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'an input–output system which can be reduced to an economic production function' (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 324). Such assumptions have serious implications for teaching and learning practices as they imply that universities are sites, primarily, for providing knowledge that is economically productive, and tend to marginalise other understandings of the purpose of higher education (McArthur, 2011). Williams (2013) has argued that the 'liberal' purpose of higher education has been squeezed out as a result of the increasing use of higher education for non-educational ends (here, she refers to its use as a vehicle for promoting social inclusion as well as for serving the labour market). As a consequence of these putative shifts, it is argued that the role of the student has also been reconfigured – frequently positioned as an instrumental, employment-focused consumer. Writing with respect to the UK in particular, Molesworth et al. (2009) argue that the inculcation of a consumer identity has brought about a more passive approach to learning, in which students place much more emphasis on their rights rather than their responsibilities, and on *having* a degree rather than *being* a learner.

Within Europe, these trends have been linked, by some scholars, to the Bologna Process and the creation of a European Higher Education Area. These reforms have aimed to harmonise higher education systems across the continent and beyond through, for example, introducing easily readable and comparable degrees (based on two main cycles); implementing a system of European learning credits; supporting the mobility of students and staff; promoting co-operation in quality assurance; and encouraging a European dimension within the curriculum (Szolár, 2011). Implicit in these reforms is, many scholars argue, a desire to align universities more strongly with the market and emphasise the role of higher education in supporting national and regional economies (Robertson, 2009). While European universities have traditionally served a variety of ends, some related to distinct national characteristics and priorities (Sam & van der Sijde, 2014), Slaughter and Cantwell (2012) have argued that, increasingly, the distinctiveness of national HE systems has been lost, as universities are 'reverse-engineered' around an Anglo-American model. Moreover, Moutsios (2013) has asserted that students are now positioned as consumers because of the substantive content of policies across Europe – for example, that introduce high fees (Kwiek, 2018) – as well as the specific ways in which students are discursively constructed within policy texts. Implicit, and sometimes explicit, in this work on changes to European higher education is the view that students – because of their positioning as consumers – have come to view the purpose of higher education in largely instrumental terms, concerned primarily with labour market reward.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that most extant studies, particularly those that take a comparative approach, focus on policies and institutions rather than the perspectives of students (although there are some notable exceptions – see, for example, O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018; Tomlinson, 2017). As a result, the voices of policymakers, thinkers and educators are often privileged above those of students themselves. This article begins to address this gap in the literature by focusing on students' views on the purpose of higher education. It draws on a series of focus groups with undergraduate students in six European countries (Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain) to demonstrate how understandings of the purpose of higher education are more nuanced than much of the extant literature suggests and vary, at least to some extent, by both nation-state and higher education institution.

In the remainder of this article, we first outline the research methods used. Drawing on our data, we then suggest that some students across the various countries in our sample had spent very little time considering the purpose of higher education, and explore the likely reasons for this. We then go on to discuss three of the key ways in which our respondents understood the purpose of education, focusing on the importance of personal growth and enrichment, and societal development and progress, as well as purposes more obviously aligned with labour market concerns. We show how such understandings were played out somewhat differently in the six nation-states and, in some cases, by institution. The implications of these understandings for higher education policymakers and practitioners are explored in the concluding section.

Research methods

This article is based upon 54 focus groups that were conducted with 295 undergraduate students across Europe – in Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain – as part of a European Research Council-funded project on the different ways in which students are conceptualised within and across nation-states. The six countries were chosen to provide diversity in terms of welfare regime, relationship with the European Union and the mechanisms used to fund higher education and support students financially (see Table 1 for details). In each country, we collected data in three higher education institutions (HEIs) – chosen to reflect, as far as possible, the diversity of the national HE sectors (for example, in Spain we included one private university as well as two public institutions, and in Ireland an institute of technology as well as two universities). In each HEI, we conducted three focus groups. We recruited participants through a variety of means including attending lectures, using email distribution lists

Table 1. Characteristics of the countries involved in the research.

Country	Welfare regime	Accession to the EU	Tuition fees for full-time undergraduates in public universities (2018/19)	Student support for full-time undergraduates (2018/19) – with amounts per annum
Denmark	Social democratic	1973	No tuition fees	c. 89 per cent receive needs-based grants (average of €9810); loans available to those entitled to state grant
England	Liberal	1973 (left in 2020)	Fees typically €9998 per year, paid by all students	No grants; income-contingent loans available to all for tuition; needs-based loan for maintenance costs
Germany	Corporatist	1952	No tuition fees; in 10 Länder, small administrative fee of up to €70 paid	c.22 per cent of students receive need-based grants (average of €5568 – includes integrated loan)
Ireland	Catholic corporatist	1973	'Student contribution' of €3000 per year paid by c.57 per cent of students	c.43 per cent of students receive need-based grants (average of €4600); no loans available
Poland	Post-Communist	2004	No tuition fees; one-off administrative fee of c.€50	c.15 per cent of students receive need-based grants (€1239) and 7 per cent merit-based grants (average €1108); loans available to those on lower incomes
Spain	Mediterranean/ sub-protective	1986	Tuition fees paid by c.70 per cent of students; average amount of €1081 per year	c.28 per cent of students receive need-based grants (average of €2166); no loans available

Source: European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2018)

and asking participants to suggest others who may be interested in becoming involved. The groups were comprised of national (rather than international) students. Whilst we attempted to include those from a broad range of disciplines and backgrounds, females were over-represented in our achieved sample, and relatively few mature students or those from ethnic minority backgrounds took part. In terms of subjects studied, our sample varied in accordance with what type of courses were offered in each institution but, overall, we managed to achieve a reasonable level of diversity, including natural sciences, humanities, social sciences, the arts and vocational subjects such as nursing and teaching (see Supplemental Material). Ethical approval for the study was received from the University of Surrey and the European Research Council.

Participants were asked a series of questions about how they understood what it meant to be a student in their country today and how they thought other people saw them (see Supplemental Material for the focus group schedule). They were also asked to make plasticine models to represent their identity as students and respond to extracts from policy texts and newspaper articles that discussed students. During the focus groups, all participants were asked a direct question about how they understood the purpose of higher education, and their responses to other questions also engaged with this topic, either explicitly or implicitly – it is this data upon which we draw in this article. The focus groups were conducted in English in Denmark, England and Ireland, and in the national language in Germany, Poland and Spain. All interviews were audio-recorded, fully transcribed, translated into English (where needed) and analysed. Data were first coded, using codes derived both deductively (from the literature) and inductively. To ensure that the codes were used consistently across the research team, these were discussed by the researchers at frequent intervals in relation to specific extracts of data. On the basis of the coded material, comparisons were made between countries, institutions and individuals within focus groups, and themes derived. The material we present below represents the key themes that emerged from this systematic analysis.

'Purpose' as undiscussed: higher education as an obvious next step

Across many of the focus groups, it was evident that some participants had given very little thought to what they considered to be the purpose of higher education before they enrolled in their degree courses. In many cases, this appeared to be because they conceived of it as the obvious next step after school. The following quotations are illustrative:

> It's just so obvious that it means nothing. (Ireland)

> I don't think that being a student is anything extraordinary nowadays. At one time studying was more exclusive, now it's a normal thing. (Poland)

Previous studies would suggest that such attitudes – which assume that transition to university is an obvious next step – are common among those with family experience of higher education (e.g., Ball et al., 2002). Nevertheless, our data suggest that these views may be increasingly prevalent among those from less privileged families, with no such familial history. As is shown in the Supplemental Material, a considerable number of

our participants, across all six countries, came from families where neither parent had a tertiary-level qualification. This may be a reflection of Harrison's (2019) argument that, as a result of massification, the social risks of attending higher education (experienced by those from lower socio-economic groups) have reduced, while the financial risks have also been reconfigured. It is important to recognise, however, that this evidence that hints at the increasing normalisation of transition to higher education is derived from only those who were already in the higher education system. Clearly those who do not enter HE, and are thus not included in our sample, may have radically different perspectives (this group still constitutes around half the relevant age group in most of the countries in the research).

While for some of our participants no particular consequences were associated with not having thought much about the purpose of higher education – or assuming it was a completely 'normal' transition – others did explain that, because they had not really considered at any length why they were going to university, they had problems initially understanding what their programme of study was intended to achieve. This was articulated clearly in the extract below from one of the Polish focus groups:

> Of course, we are told to attend those seminars, those lectures and so on, but when it comes to the purpose … We have to find it ourselves. I think that this is a major problem. I can't think of any lecture that defines this purpose, they just give us a schedule of the class and say "okay, if you attend those classes and pass exams, you will be awarded the diploma in engineering". That's it. Only this diploma is a kind of a purpose … But I think that nearly all the seminars or lectures lack this deeper purpose and students are sitting in those classes and think 'Why do I even need mathematics?'.

Here, the student alludes to their apparent difficulty in identifying the purpose of their course themselves, and also their desire that their lecturer outline some deeper reason for engaging with the subject matter other than merely achieving the specific qualification. This example suggests that the instrumental purpose of HE, discussed above with respect to processes of neo-liberalisation, is not in all cases passed on to students in a straightforward manner, but also that students do not necessarily have well-formed alternative conceptions of their own. It also raises some interesting questions for educators, to which we return later.

Perceived purposes of higher education

Those students who did outline a specific purpose or purposes to higher education, tended to talk about it in three main ways – as a means of preparing for the labour market, achieving personal growth and enrichment, and/or contributing to societal development and progress.

These themes were present in all countries, although more apparent in some than others. We discuss each, in turn, in the sections below.

Preparation for the labour market

The most common purpose of higher education articulated by students across the sample as a whole was to prepare themselves for the labour market. The following responses,

when students were asked directly about what they perceived to be the purpose of higher education, are indicative:

> To get a good job! (Denmark)

> So, for me it's a way to achieve a qualification that will help me get a good job later on. (Germany)

However, although such responses were common across the dataset, there was some variation in how participants conceived the relationship between universities and the labour market. Evident in the narratives of some students, although not all, was a belief that a degree was necessary to avoid having to take up a low skilled job, but not necessarily sufficient for highly skilled or professional employment. A participant in an English focus group commented: 'I don't really think there's much of an option. If you want to get a decent job these days, you've got to go to university because people won't look at you if you haven't been'. Here, we see played out a shift that has been documented in other research – from conceiving of higher education as an 'investment' to help secure upward social mobility to viewing it as an 'insurance' against downward mobility (see, for example, Harrison, 2019). For some students, a degree was thus seen as the basic minimum required to secure any job, rather than a route to professional or managerial positions.

Some differences by nation-state were also evident. Indeed, emphasis on the purpose of higher education as preparation for the labour market was strongest in the three countries in our sample where students had to make the greatest personal financial contribution to the cost of HE: England, Ireland, Spain (see also later discussion). Moreover, in Spain and Poland, the discourse was played out in a particular way, with many students differentiating between what they saw as the *intended* purpose of higher education, and what they had experienced in practice. They believed universities should be preparing them for subsequent employment but that, in reality, the link between the two remained somewhat weak. For example, participants in one Polish focus group commented: 'I would say that the higher education system doesn't consider what is happening on the market, what are the needs … on the market'. This perceived disconnect between higher education and the labour market can be explained, in the case of Spain, by the relatively high levels of youth unemployment that were evident in the country at the time of our data collection (2018–19). Indeed, 34.3 per cent of young people were unemployed, compared with 13.8 in the country in our sample that had the next highest rate (Ireland) (Eurostat, 2019). In Poland, such comments accorded with a more general sense – evident in other parts of our dataset – that because the rate of HE participation had increased so sharply over recent years (from 10 per cent of each age cohort in 1989 to around 50 per cent currently) (Kwiek, 2018), the previously close relationship between HE and the labour market had been disrupted. We suggest that this may have informed the comments made by our focus group participants.

Institutional differences were also evident. Many of our participants believed that institutions differed in their ability to prepare students for future employment. In general, and across most countries, this was thought to differ depending on the status of the institution in which students were enrolled. Those institutions that were seen as more prestigious were thought to have better labour market returns – even if students recognised that, in many cases, this was not obviously a result of any particular differences in the teaching and learning provided. (Indeed, research has shown that teaching

quality is often similar among institutions of different statuses e.g. Boliver, 2015.) This kind of comment was made across many types of institution in the six countries, including both prestigious and relatively low status.

While such views were widely held across the dataset, there were also some differences by institution in the perspectives of focus group participants.[1] In Germany, for example, students attending one particular institution – a university of applied sciences that offered a relatively narrow range of subjects – thought that they had less pressure on them to secure prestigious jobs after graduation, and could thus approach their higher education in a different manner, placing more emphasis on other purposes such as personal growth and knowledge acquisition. As one student commented:

> I think in a lot of universities the only goal of education now is to get you into management positions, as quickly and efficiently as possible … . we're one of the 'marginal universities' … . I do think that at a university like this one, that to some extent resists this 'get them through quickly', as efficiently as possible and so on, that here there's still to some extent the attitude of giving people the time, developing capabilities in people and not being at a purely cognitive level. (German focus group)

In England and Spain, differences were also evident between institutions – although these were played out rather differently from the German case above. Students at the lowest status higher education institution in England were more likely to emphasise labour market preparation than their peers at the two higher status institutions, while those at the two public universities in Spain were more likely to view the purpose of higher education in these terms than those at the private university. It is likely that these differences can be explained, at least to some extent, by the social composition of the different institutions. Students from less privileged backgrounds are more likely to be found in lower status HEIs in England and public universities in Spain, while previous research has shown that, because higher education is more of a social and financial risk for those from less privileged backgrounds, such students need to be more sure of the material rewards (e.g., Ball et al., 2002). Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that such students were more likely to foreground employment-related issues when discussing the purpose of higher education. These institutional differences are also, of course, influenced by the wider national picture: institutional differentiation is greater in these two countries than in the other four nations as a result of the strong vertical hierarchy of HEIs in England, and the division between public and private universities in Spain.

Personal growth and enrichment

A second commonly articulated purpose of higher education was related to ideas about personal growth and enrichment. This was evident in all six countries in our sample, even in England where the HE sector is highly marketised and in Denmark where the language used in policy is increasingly neo-liberal in orientation (Wright & Ørberg, 2017). This purpose was discussed in two main ways. Some focus group participants emphasised how they were growing through the knowledge they were gaining. The extract below illustrates well this perspective:

> [A]t university you have the opportunity to dip your toe into other things, perhaps to think about things more deeply, things people wouldn't normally think about and perhaps that's a little bit of what, university has to offer, the opportunity to delve into other topics and to

> develop … how a person defines him or herself and what their attitude is to the world. (German focus group)

Others, however, placed more emphasis on aspects of wider learning that they had experienced since embarking upon their degree – related to, for example, interacting with a more diverse group of people than they had previously, and having to be more independent:

> I kind of view myself … . Like a flower that blossomed throughout my education. … . Not only have I learned some nursing knowledge but I also learnt a lot about myself in my social skills. (Danish focus group)

> Yeah, it [university education] is not just coming out with a transcript that is supposedly going to get you on a grad scheme! It, it does shape you a lot as a person, you learn an awful lot. It's like a kind of buffer time between entire like independence and being a child! And having independence, yeah, you do a lot of growing in that time. And it's a definite like safe space to be trying out new things and seeing what works and what doesn't. (English focus group)

While emphasis on personal growth and development was a common theme across the focus groups, there were, however, some variations by nation. This purpose was articulated more frequently in Denmark, Germany and Poland than in the other three nations – countries where students make less of a personal financial contribution to the cost of their higher education. Moreover, when this purpose was brought up in England, it was associated particularly with independent living, with students making plasticine models of frying pans and houses, for example, to illustrate this. Such variations thus appear to be related to structural factors, such as how higher education is funded (with students in publicly funded systems apparently more likely to stress personal growth than those in systems where individual contributions are higher), and also cultural norms. Indeed, the cultural significance of moving away from home for higher education (even when a significant minority of students do not do this) in England is notable – explained by the historical importance of residential accommodation to the national model of provision (Whyte, 2019).

Societal development and progress

The third commonly perceived purpose of higher education was related to contributing to societal development and progress. This was mentioned by students in all six countries to some extent. It was, however, most frequently brought up in Denmark, Germany and Poland – the three nations where students make less of a personal contribution to their higher education than in the other countries in the sample, and receive greater support from the state (see Table 1). In these countries, the idea of HE as 'public good' was articulated more regularly and, correspondingly, less emphasis was placed on the individual benefits that were thought to accrue through gaining a university degree.

Students tended to talk about societal development and progress in one of three main ways. First, a number of students placed particular emphasis on the knowledge they were gaining and/or generating in higher education and believed that this would help contribute to developing a more enlightened society:

> Somehow it's all about progress … it's about advancing different subjects in order to widen our knowledge or to refute old findings and thus always … Yes it's basically about getting

> closer to 'true knowledge', perhaps to make work easier for people in the way that we build new things and how you design new things, so by planning roads in such a way that people are happier and that they are more in harmony with nature, that the economy runs more smoothly (German focus group)

> [university is about] something deeper … being enlightened about poetry, literature, and all those things … to be enlightened about ideas that can move the world to a better place. (Danish focus group)

Here, we see a strong attachment to ideas about the 'liberal' purposes of higher education, which suggests that, in some countries at least, recent reforms have not 'squeezed out' this particular purpose (Williams, 2013) and that, despite the recent denigration of 'expert knowledge' within many countries of the Global North, many students continue to adhere to notions of truth and progress.

Second, in other cases, students suggested that the purpose of HE was to create a more critical society, rather than producing docile citizens who do not reflect on the world around them. Such sentiments are evident in these extracts from focus groups in Poland and Germany:

> [University education is critical to] shaping a responsible and wise society … one which is not blind, which will do as it is told. (Polish focus group)

> … you can certainly contribute … to shaping, changing our system, to speaking out and that, during your degree course, you're given the necessary tools to do that and the path to such positions where you can initiate change, is opened up to you. (German focus group)

Implicit in such narratives is what Biesta (2009) has described as the 'subjectification' purpose of education: it is not, he claims, 'about the insertion of "newcomers" into existing orders, but about ways of being that hint at independence from such orders; ways of being in which the individual is not just a "specimen" of a more encompassing order' (p. 40). Education is thus understood as having a particular political force.

Finally, some students understood societal development and progress in terms of the international competitiveness of their particular nation-state. Here, higher education was seen as important in developing the knowledge and skills of individuals to enable them to compete effectively with others within a global market and also, in the case of Ireland, to attract inward investment:

> We're such a small country, we have to do well … we're such a small people [population] so we have to do better because there are so many people around the world who do better than use. So we have to work even harder to compete with them. (Danish focus group)

> It [Ireland] is a nice place for [big corporations] to come and settle down because we have nice taxes and then we have highly educated people who can work there. (Irish focus group)

It is interesting that only in Denmark and Ireland was national competitiveness talked about in this way by students and viewed as a key purpose of higher education. This is likely to be linked to specific geo-political and economic factors, particularly the relatively small size of both nations when compared to some of their European neighbours and the structure of their labour markets. However, cultural factors may also be influential: in general, the tenor of the discussion in the Danish focus groups tended to be considerably more collectivist than in the other five countries – likely linked to the social democratic

norms that have prevailed in the country, and which, despite the neo-liberal rhetoric referred to previously, still remain relatively strong.

Conclusion

It is clear from our focus groups that many students, across Europe, believe that a key purpose of higher education is to prepare them for labour market entry. In many ways, this reflects dominant policy discourses in which students are positioned clearly as 'future workers' and the economic rationale for degree-level study is typically foregrounded (Brooks, 2019; McArthur, 2011). Nevertheless, as we have shown above, students' views in this respect are nuanced and complex. While some believe higher education is currently fulfilling this purpose, others think it is something HEIs *should* do, rather than an accurate description of their current activities. While some students see higher education as providing a route to professional and managerial jobs, others view it as merely an insurance against low skilled employment. There are, moreover, important differences by institution. In England and Spain, students attending the lowest status institution and public universities, respectively, tended to emphasise the economic function of higher education more than their peers at other institutions – a pattern, we have suggested, that is likely to be informed by differences in social class, in which those who take on more social and financial risk in enrolling for a degree are more likely to be concerned about its material rewards. In Germany, however, this was played out differently, with students at the more vocationally-oriented institution (which students perceived as lower status than other HEIs) feeling less pressure to focus on only labour market outcomes. We have also shown how viewing the purpose of higher education as preparation for work varied to some extent between nations, seemingly stronger in those countries where students make more of a personal financial contribution to the cost of their degree (i.e., England, Ireland and Spain).

Nevertheless, our data also indicate that – despite the strong emphasis on labour market preparation by both national governments and key players in the Bologna Process (Robertson, 2009) – students across our six countries rarely viewed higher education solely in these terms. Other key purposes were also articulated – the most common being the opportunity to develop personally (through the acquisition of knowledge and/or develop wider skills) and contribute to societal development and progress. Although these purposes were more commonly discussed in the three countries where the state continues to make a very significant contribution to the funding of higher education and tuition fees are not payable by students (Denmark, Germany and Poland), they were articulated by students in the other three countries, too – even in England where higher education is positioned clearly by the state as an individual investment because of the high level of fees that are charged. Indeed, some students were conscious of the tension between what they considered to be the purpose of higher education, and what they believed was their government's view:

> [T]he important thing [according to the government] is that you're there to serve a commercial purpose and nothing more, that you're not studying to achieve something for yourself but for others, for the economy, and I find that really annoying, because it's not my idea of studying, which is about forming and educating yourself. (German focus group)

> It should all be about knowledge for the sake of knowledge; it shouldn't be about knowledge for the sake of jobs or for the sake of economic interests. And so, it's like conflicting a little bit between what it is in reality and what my ideal view of universities is. (Danish focus group)

This evidence suggests that while policymakers may understand students as economically motivated consumers, who see the purpose of higher education in terms of labour market preparation, and continue to introduce policies that attempt to measure the 'quality' of higher education in terms of employment outcomes (McArthur, 2011), many students have broader views (here there are strong commonalities with O'Shea and Delahunty (2018)'s work in the Australian context). A considerable number of our participants held that higher education provides society with a protected space in which thoughts and ideas can be pursued to the highest level; intellectual inquiry is of intrinsic worth; and HEIs play an important role in promoting the public good through facilitating reasoning and debate (Collini, 2012). Many also shared the view that higher education can promote democratic and critical engagement, while also furthering collective, rather than solely individual, ends.

Our data also speak to broader debates about the relationship between policy and students' perspectives. Some of the national differences we have noted above – such as the frequency of comments about HE as labour market preparation in countries where students share more of the cost of degree-level study themselves, and about personal development and societal progress in countries where the state shoulders more of the financial burden – suggest that policy can have a significant impact on how we see the world, and its influence can reach well beyond the specific areas it has been formulated to address (Bacchi, 2000). They also support Zaloom's (2019) contention that mechanisms introduced to fund higher education can have relatively wide-ranging impacts. Moreover, the evidence presented above indicates that the structure of national systems can affect the extent to which students share the same perspectives. We have shown, for example, that in Spain and England, which have the most vertically differentiated HE systems in our sample, students' perspectives differed more – with respect to their views about the purpose of HE at least – than their counterparts in the other four countries. Nevertheless, we have also suggested that the impact of policy is perhaps not as all-encompassing as some scholars have argued. Indeed, even within the most marketized systems in our sample, many focus group participants did still emphasise the non-economic role of higher education – facilitating personal development and enabling societal development. Students thus demonstrated their ability effectively to 'answer back' (Clarke et al., 2007) to politicians and policymakers who tend to understand the purpose of higher education as primarily (and sometimes exclusively) a preparation for labour market participation (Brooks, 2019).

The national differences highlighted above also point to some of the limits of European homogenisation, suggesting that the enduring differences in funding across the continent impact on broader understandings of what higher education is all about. Furthermore, our discussion has pointed to other cultural and geo-political influences that have helped to sustain differences by nation-state. These can be seen, for example, in the valorisation of the residential model of HE in England (Whyte, 2019), which may help explain the frequency with which English students discussed the importance of higher education as a stepping stone to adulthood. They are also evident in the prioritisation Danish and Irish student gave to ideas around national competitiveness – seemingly linked to national narratives

about the importance of 'knowledge resources' to small states within a global market. Such differences raise questions about assertions, discussed previously, that European higher education has been 'reverse-engineered' around an Anglo-American model (Slaughter & Cantwell, 2012), in which students have taken up the role of consumers (Moutsios, 2013). Moreover, the differences highlighted by institution (in relation to viewing the purpose of HE as about labour market participation in particular) suggest that even nations should not necessarily be considered as 'coherent educational entities' (Philips & Schweisfurth, 2014).

Various implications for policymakers, higher education staff and society more broadly follow from these findings. First, while our data suggest that decisions made about fees and funding may well have wider impacts (for example, in the correlation between types of funding regime and the most common views about the purpose of HE in a given country), they also demonstrate the capacity of students to resist dominant policy discourse. Indeed, the evidence from our focus groups suggests that those formulating policy should be aware that, even in nations that charge high fees, many students see higher education, to some extent at least, as a public good through which they contribute to society rather than as a private good linked closely to labour market rewards. Some students would like to see these broader purposes more explicitly recognised within higher education policy and practice, and are critical of the economically-focused ways in which politicians and policymakers often talk about degree-level study. Second, it would seem important for those working in higher education institutions also to be sensitive to these broad views about purpose and not assume that students are solely or even primarily focused on employment, or position themselves as 'consumers' of education (Nixon et al., 2018). Implicit and explicit understandings of students inform curriculum design, the nature of extra-curricular provision as well as day-to-day interactions between staff and students in classrooms – it is thus important that staff recognise the variety of views students bring with them. It would also seem useful if institutions provide time for students to consider what they believe to be the purpose of their studies – given the evidence presented earlier about the increasing normalisation of transitions to higher education, and some students' acknowledgement that they had not thought about the purpose of higher education in any meaningful way before. Finally, society more broadly can learn from these students' responses – being more aware of the evident tensions between policy discourses and students' own views about the purpose of higher education, and of the significant ways in which degree-level study enhances lives, both individually and collectively, beyond the merely economic.

Note

1. In our analysis, such institutional differences were evident primarily in relation to the ways in which students discussed labour market preparation. Differences with respect to the other purposes explored in the article were more evident at the national level.

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